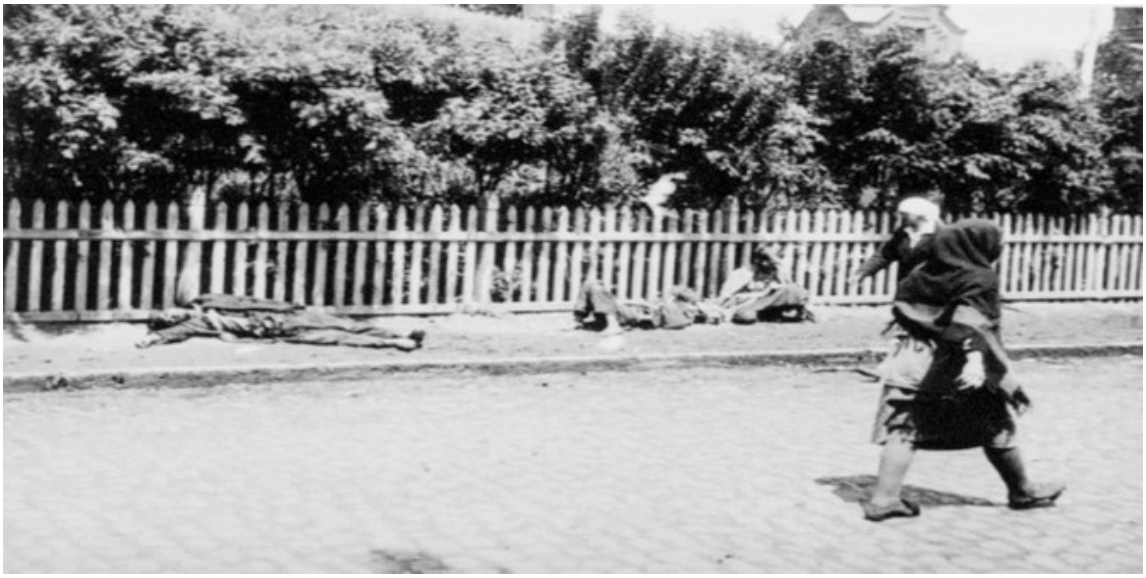
“Inflicted Starvation”: The Link Between Conflict and Famine

Haisley Wert, MSc Development Management candidate, reflects on a recent public lecture from Alex de Waal, Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation and Research Professor at The Fletcher School, about his new book, Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine.



The government’s forced collectivization of agriculture was one of the main causes of the Soviet famine of 1932–1933.

Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine
Hosted by LSE, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa
Thursday, January 25th, 2018

Alex de Waal, Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation and Research Professor at The Fletcher School, squarely addressed dangerous misconceptions about starvation during the lecture “Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine”. Hosted by the LSE Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa on the evening of Thursday, January 25th, 2018, he was joined by discussants Clare Short, Former UK Secretary of State for International Development, and Professor Mary Kaldor, Director of the Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit at the LSE. The talk accompanied the recent release of Professor de Waal’s book by the same title.

Clare Short lauded his clarity and resonance in the publication, explaining: “a lot of the [famine] discussion…is so emotional…[that] it’s ignorant… The value of the book is to make discussion much more informed about what causes hunger and famine”. de Waal changes the conversation, escorting starvation (the causal and controversial cousin of famine) into the room and appropriately politicizing it.

Mass starvation, he implored, is the “issue of our time”. Yet, it is conceived of as an archaic misfortune, confined vaguely to the great geographical expanse of Africa. There is the misperception that technology is eclipsing its ravages, as people conflate famine with chronic hunger, ameliorated in the public eye by new food production mechanisms that are boons to swelling, increasingly urbanized amalgamations of populations.

Date originally posted: 2018-01-31

Permalink: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2018/01/31/inflicted-starvation-the-link-between-conflict-and-famine/

Blog homepage: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/

“Just google ‘famine’”, he readily and not-so-rhetorically insisted, pulling up quadrants of images summoned by the search engine. One doesn’t need to scour all corners of the internet to observe that famine conjures images of deserts, atrophied crops, and skeletal subjects. The narrative around famine is abstract and pity-based, rather than empirically-grounded and infuriating. In response, de Waal systematically and substantively unpacks seven main famine fictions in his work. Bookending the collection are two weighty and resolute ideas that redress the problem and reinforce the solution:

1. Starvation is the problem, and famine is the outcome. It comes from the transitive verb, *to starve*, which means that humans inflict it upon each other. In fact, the man who coined the word ‘genocide’ focused more intently on rations over gas chambers. We need to shift out attention to the man-made atrocity of the problem.

And, as alluded to, which also served as a pre-Question and Answer parting note:

2. “We must celebrate the global liberal humanitarian world order…” so that we can uphold it. We have welcomed in the changing time of decreasing autocracy, openness, informational freedom, more democracy, and correspondingly, heightened responsiveness and accountability of publics and governments. De Waal metaphorically contextualized his argument: if the peasant were analogously up to his or her neck in water before, in effect, liberalism has lowered the water level. Small waves could no longer sweep him under. But there is never a moment where democratic values should be taken for granted, as “large rogue waves” are increasingly common and devastating.

Development economist Amartya Sen would take heart in this entreaty. As he wrote in his 1999 piece, Democracy as a Global Value, “in the terrible history of famines in the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press” (Sen 1999: 7 and 8). This greater call to value civic engagement and uphold democratic duty is practicable on even the level of the individual.

Broadening his case, at the core of de Waal’s argument are seven terse truths that international constituencies need to confront to end mass starvation as a war-implement:

1. Famines are “less lethal” than they have been in any previous time. Although they have instigated over 100 million deaths since 1870, about 40 years ago, this death toll plummeted off a graphic precipice. The consequence of famine now is migration. With a well-enacted and cohesive strategy in action, famines are possible to end.
2. The most “recent leading cause” of famine is armed conflict. Subsequently predominant factors include active political repression and emerging from an armed conflict. These three statuses make up more than 75% of all famines. The remaining quarter or so of famines, that occurred without conflict or repression, are largely featured in the nineteenth century.
3. Famine is not mainly an African phenomenon. Between 1870 and 2010, about half of all famines occurred in China. Only 10% of famines occurred in Africa, as inflicted in the colonial and post-colonial periods, and they are much less severe.
4. Famines are “exceptional and multi-causal”. With the exception of China in the 1950s, in most famines, infectious diseases perpetrate murder in numbers far greater than any other factor. Some famines are directly inflicted by poor governance. Other political reasons, alongside ecological or economic events, can also influence conditions of starvation.
5. Starvation is not caused by over-population. Food consumption is a relatively “small drag on our resources”. As we approach finite boundaries, “the pinch will be felt somewhere else”.
6. Famines are inflicted along four degrees of intention, three of which are anthropocentric. Second degree famines, “famines of recklessness”, where “public authorities pursue policies that are the cause of famine, [of which] they are aware”, have been the most prominent degree of infliction in contemporary times. Mass starvation in Yemen, a result of the Saudi and Emirati blockade (as supported by the United States and United Kingdom) is an example of second degree famine.
7. “There is enough law on the books to criminalize famine”, and the fact it hasn’t been “publically vilified” is a problem of misinformation and apathy. Alex de Waal calls for a commitment where “leaders will not let this occur, and the public will demand this of them”. Clare Short agreed that criminalization of starvation would be critically conducive to its amelioration.

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Alex de Waal confronts starvation in a pithy and powerful way, dispelling a pervasive and fundamentally misled public narrative. We must necessarily understand mass starvation as a human-made tool of repression to effectively engineer its demise.

The article was first published in LSE International Development blog.

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